

Honorable Judge Buchwald
United States District Judge
Southern District of New York

Dear Judge Buchwald,

My name is Sarah Valerio Pujols, and I am a sister, an aunt, a friend, a loving partner, and a devoted mother to my beautiful little boy, [REDACTED]. It is with profound regret and humility that I am writing this letter to express my sincere apologies for my actions, and I hope to show you who I am beyond them.

I was born in the Dominican Republic and came to New York when I was 6 years old. I come from a big family who I am very close to, and I am the youngest of 5 siblings. I'm lucky to have a family that is as close as we are. I grew up as a child of God in a religious family, and I was taught very early on what's right from wrong. Although I did leave the church at an early age, I've always maintained my spirituality and relationship with God. My loved ones can not only attest to the importance I place in my relationships but also my trustworthiness and kindness with everyone, especially when it comes to my friends and family. The actions that led to this case were truly uncharacteristic of me and what I stand for, and had I not been in such a horrible state of mind this would have never happened.

My actions, which I deeply regret, were committed during one of the most trying periods in my life. Coming from a big family, I always wanted to have kids of my own. From as early as I can remember I dreamt of becoming a mother, so my husband and I wanted to have a baby as soon as possible. A couple years went by without getting pregnant and I started to feel the cultural pressure and expectations of having children even more. This affected me heavily. I was embarrassed that I couldn't get pregnant, and I thought that something was wrong with me. My gynecologist referred me to a fertility specialist from NYU Langone in Long Island, and we began doing procedures for IVF. The fertility specialist thought my tubes would have to be removed but thankfully they noticed I didn't need to have them removed during the laparoscopy surgery. We then went ahead with IUI, which I did twice before finally getting pregnant. The emotional turmoil of these procedures and my fertility issues took a significant toll on both my mental health and physical well-being. I was at appointments, driving from the Bronx to Long Island, almost every day—I even had to take time off from my job to fit it all in my schedule. Even though I had health insurance, the IUI procedures and fertility treatments I was receiving were very expensive and not fully covered. My husband and I couldn't afford to continue paying for these medical bills with our income, so I needed extra money.

At this point, I was in a fragile emotional and financial state, just trying to make my dream of becoming a mother come true, and an individual who I considered my friend presented a way to help me do so. This was a family friend who I had known since I was 16 years old. Our families knew each other in the Dominican Republic, and we grew into great friends, always hanging out and going to dinners. He was at every major event in my life, including my wedding and my IUI

insemination. I considered him to be more than a friend—he was family. I honestly thought I was doing my best friend, my brother, a favor. But I also take full responsibility for my actions. Regardless of our relationship, I should never have let my circumstances and trust in an individual blind me. I regret not asking more questions about the money and I regret bringing the money at all because I knew it was something that I should not have engaged with in the first place. I have had to live with the repercussions of my actions every day since the start of this case, and it has been the most difficult situations I have faced in my life.

The embarrassment and shame I feel every day because of my actions have been unbearable. I feel guilty for putting my friends, family, husband, and, most importantly, my son through something like this. I used to be the life of the party and I've never been one to shy away from anything, but I've closed myself off a bit. If I meet someone and they look me up, I know they can google me and see this case. Seeing the impact this case has had on my family alone has been punishment enough. My mom and siblings were devastated when they found out. My mom prays for me and calls me every day, and my siblings have been so supportive, helping me in any way they can. My husband tries not to talk too much about it and he tries to be strong for me, but I know he's worried about what might happen if I go away. I think about it every day. Every time my son goes to bed and he says, "I need you mom" or "I love you mom," there is not one day that I don't think about how I might be separated from my little boy.

██████ is the light of my eyes, and we haven't spent a moment apart since he was born. Our connection is so strong, and the thought of not being with ██████ is what I have been struggling with the most. He is very attached: he's always asking for me and near me all the time. I have dedicated myself to nurturing his development and well-being, and this is my greatest concern in all of this: Thiago's well-being. I can't even begin to imagine the impact that my going away will have on a 4-year-old who is used to having his mom around 24/7. From playing with him and making him meals to reading his *My First Bible Stories* book to him every night and practicing affirmations with him in English and Spanish, his whole routine will be disrupted. Separation would also deny me milestones, and take away Thiago's comfort and guidance, which he finds in me. My husband would have to hire someone to help because he works full-time. I don't sleep at night thinking about this and the pain my family will face.

It's been very difficult for my husband and I to go through this with limited support. While my siblings have helped me in any way they can, I have no immediate or extended family in New York anymore, and they're all far from me. My friends have come to my house and offered childcare support whenever they can, but it's not consistent and we don't have anyone that helps us with ██████ regularly. It's literally just me and my husband, and I have been Thiago's primary caretaker since he was born because of my husband's full-time job.

Childcare is the biggest financial struggle we have right now. We cannot afford to pay for daycare or babysitting because my husband is our family's only source of income, and things are tough enough as it is. If I were to be incarcerated my husband would not be able to afford the

childcare and support that I have been providing for us. I don't know what he would do, but I do know it would be devastating for us on all levels.

Since my mother has moved to Missouri, I am no longer working as her home health aide as I was for years before. Our tight financial situation pushed me to apply to a variety of work-from-home jobs over the past couple of months. With a work-from-home position, I can continue to take care of [REDACTED] and be there to pick him up from school or emergencies while making some extra money for my family. Unfortunately, my professional life has also felt the repercussions of this case. A simple background check has been enough to keep me from getting job offers. After struggling to find employment and applying to many work-from-home positions, I was offered a remote job as a Customer Service Representative for CVS Health and I am hopeful about the doors this job could open for me, but they are awaiting the sentencing on my case before allowing me to begin. I'm worried that any period of incarceration will cause them to rescind the job offer and force me back to square one.

I am more than this mistake, and I have spent the past months proving that this situation neither defines me nor represents who I am. Even before this case I had already began to look into finishing my college degree, taking online courses, and looking for work-from-home jobs. I took this terrible situation and decided to make the most of it, working hard to change and improve myself. While working as a primary caregiver and Home Health Aide for my mother, assisting her in her everyday needs, I also took a wide range of self-development courses. Some of these include a customer service chat course from Zen Desk and a professional development course called "Pinnacles" with the Kelm Academy, a business school that provides credits I can use to continue my associate degree.

When this is over, I hope that I will be able to start my job as a Customer Service Representative and simultaneously take courses to get my associate degree in Business Administration from CUNY's online degree program. I have even applied for federal student aid and would receive some if I were to start this school year. Just having that degree will open so many doors for me and give me the fresh start I need. I would eventually apply to an executive assistant position and improve the quality of life for my family.

I also plan on moving to Missouri to be closer to my family and have that extra emotional and childcare support that we are missing in New York. I want my son to grow up with my siblings and his cousins, and to have my family unit closer. My husband and my son are my main motivations for accomplishing these goals and going through with these plans. I want my son to be in a better environment, where we don't have to worry about craziness and violence. I also want him to get a better education than he would here.

In desperation, I implore Your Honor to consider an alternative to incarceration. This would allow me to parent, make amends, and rebuild. My mistakes have broken me, but hope remains as I've worked diligently on improving for myself and my family. I trust Your Honor will consider the circumstances surrounding my actions and the devastating consequences that my

incarceration would have on my family. I hope you've seen the depth of my regret, the sincerity of my plea, and the potential for redemption that lies within me.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Sarah Valerio Pujols